

Responding to a Child's Distress

The 3 Rs



RESPONDING, REACTING AND RESTORING

RESPONDING

You will be able to respond more effectively to a child in distress if you have spent time building a trusted relationship with the child.

Understanding the child and their story is the first thing that will equip us with the ability to respond to their needs.

What are the factors that cause distress?

How do we understand the child's distress?

What is the child communicating through their behaviour?

What are the barriers to building relationships, communicating and learning?

Understanding what a child is communicating to us is our first priority

This means LISTENING*.

** Check in with how you are feeling. Can you listen? Is something preventing you from listening? Are you stressed? What are your feelings towards the child? Will this influence your ability to remain available to the child? Do you have your own agenda?*

Stop or Pause

Recognise that talking means you are not listening. When a child is distressed, they are unlikely to be listening to your point of view. Stop or pause so you can drop your own personal agenda.

Consider, what does the child need?

When we don't stop and listen to what the child needs this is likely to lead to further escalation in arousal. Offering the child what they need can reduce



arousal*, enabling them to re-engage. Give, in the short term to achieve longer term gains

**this is not "giving in" to the child, this is responding to their needs*

Be With

Resist walking away. Emotionally contained and calm adults provide the co-regulation a child needs to manage their emotions and move through their distress.

Work to reduce arousal

By considering the factors within the environment that might be antagonising or increasing arousal, consider factors that might be perceived as hostile or is uncontainable for the child and therefore affecting their sense of safety and increasing arousal eg

- Consider tone and posture – are you mirroring distress?
- Consider positioning in the room – could you be perceived as threatening?
- Consider what you are saying
- Consider your own internal state of arousal. How do you feel and is this impacting on your ability to respond in a helpful way?

Only when a child is calm can they truly listen so this is not the time to get your point across. You can return to this at a later point

Naming emotions

Offering children the literacy to support them to communicate how they feel. Talking openly with young people about their emotions where appropriate, using open questions "what does that feel like for you?" enable children to learn about their emotions and puts them in a better position to cope in the future

REACTING

For the purposes of this document, Reacting is responding quickly in the moment

Mistakes we can make when we react quickly:

- We become led by our emotions
 - Shouting at a child
 - Dismissing a child, "I don't have time"
 - Using physical intervention too quickly to prevent something happening or to prevent escalation
- We take things personally
- We stop listening
- We find ourselves arguing with a child



- We punish them by taking away things that they like

Reacting to a child's distress is associated with ensuring the child is safe and the people around the child is safe.

If safe to do so, adults can apply similar strategies as those highlighted under responding:

- BREATHE!
- Listen to the child / what are they communicating?
- Be clear when things are becoming unsafe
- Offer an alternative

"let's get outside and run together"

"lets shout into the wind"

"lets try....."

- Work to reduce arousal
- Communicate that you want to listen but you also want to keep the child safe
- Be mindful of appearing threatening
- If a child is becoming physically aggressive, let them know you will take a step back, but you are there for them as soon as they can be safe
- If they are doing something dangerous, offer a limit within the context of care "I'd like you to stop because I'm worried you are going to hurt yourself"

To ensure the safety of those around the child, adults can react by supporting other young people to move out of harm's way or by moving themselves out of harm's way if safe to do so

To ensure the safety of the child, appropriately assessed and regulated methods, such as CALM must only be employed by fully trained adults and only when there is significant risk of harm to self and others. Any form of restrictive practice is traumatic for both child and adult and should be avoided unless absolutely necessary

All other de-escalation strategies must be exhausted and clear justification for any restrictive intervention must be in place with the safety of the child considered alongside the child's rights



RESTORING

This part of the process is often missed altogether and yet there is much evidence to suggest that this is the part that results in longer term improvements in emotional literacy and emotional regulation

Restoration is the process by which **the adult and the child reflect on the child's distress when the child is in a calm place** in order to better understand what happened and what the child and adult can do when the child feels this way again.

It provides an opportunity to talk with young people about their emotions, naming these and reflecting on their experience of this emotion in their body.

Restoration also enables the adult and the child to talk about the impact of the child's distress, upon themselves and those around them, building empathy. It supports new understanding, new learning about strategies that might be effective in the future and encourages conflict resolution

It requires the adult to be in a place of open forgiveness and supports problem solving – "how can we help you with this in the future?"

It is **NOT** about telling a child off or shaming a child and does require understanding of the restorative process to be done supportively.

Adults must be prepared to move forward and **NOT** hold grudges against the child or require retribution. The process of forgiveness is powerful in building relationships and enables you to talk with the child about what you would like to see in the future without the child feeling like the relationship is at risk of breaking down.

NB When you are repeatedly experiencing the distress of a child in your care, whether in a care setting or within a school setting, please ensure that appropriate adults are aware of the child's distress and a joined-up approach is adopted to provide a consistent response.

It may be that specialist advice will need to be sought with the consent of parents / carers or that child protection measures are required. Please consult with your organization for advice.

